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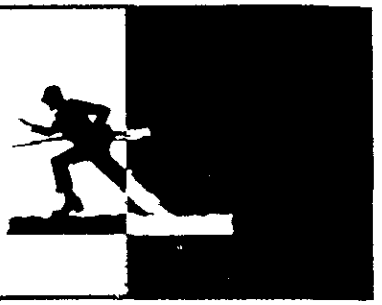

GET OUT OF TOWN

Lieutenant David J. Daze

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is another in our continuing series of PAST TIMES pieces—articles selected from earlier issues that present combat lessons learned. We feel the lessons presented in this series have considerable relevance for today's Infantryman.

This particular piece originally appeared in the October 1957 issue of the INFANTRY SCHOOL QUARTERLY, pages 46-49. The author fought both as an enlisted man and as an officer with the 3d Infantry Division in Italy, France, and the Rhineland. He was seriously wounded and was retired from the Army in September 1945.

Many a Westerner is lying under the sod of "Boot Hill" because he did not heed the ominous warning, "Get out of town!" And many a soldier—of many a nation—is lying under a white cross because he too failed to "Get out of town."

Towns can be deathtraps, especially for small units. Many men have been captured or massacred because they were boxed in and unable to use their weapons in self-imposed traps. Squads and platoons have invited disaster by huddling in cellars for warmth or companionship, with only a guard or two at street level. These guards would be picked off or driven back in upon their comrades. Then the whole unit was helpless, unable to move, shoot, or see. Several times I narrowly missed having all or part of my own unit suffer this humiliating fate. And this was not the result of ignorance—it was softness. I simply didn't exercise the self-discipline or toughness required to force exhausted men out into the weather.

It would be foolish to say that towns or smaller built-up areas are indefensible. History contradicts such a statement. Where the terrain and the town permit the primary consideration of observation and fields of fire, adequate defense is possible. Also, there are times when the rubble of stone buildings makes a fairly good fortress. Battered hilltop villages in Italy and North Africa proved this. The rubble that may follow in the wake of atomic weapons can also be put to good use, by units of the triangular division or by new, fast moving, pentomic infantry and airborne units. However, an inhabited area should not be used unless the unit is large enough (or the town small enough) for most of the houses on the outside perimeter to be physically occupied. And every man must have a firing port with some field of fire.

The important point is to make proper use of terrain in establishing the defensive position so that maximum advantage is taken of the best observation and fields of fire available. There are very few instances where the immediate countryside would not offer a far better battlefield, assuming the unit had some chance to dig in. It is much easier for the enemy to lob a grenade into a room than into a foxhole. A few ricocheting .30 caliber or 7.62mm slugs can play havoc in stone rooms while they would pass harmlessly over heads elsewhere. Very few roofs give protection against medium artillery and the concussion inside will burst eardrums. Tank fire can turn the occupants of a house into mincemeat.

These things have happened countless times—there is nothing theoretical here. It is the nightmare of a lone guard sitting sleepily at a window, or standing peacefully in a dark doorway while his companions confidently cook, dry clothing, or sleep that brings shudders to troop commanders. Men in such a situation simply haven't a fighting chance. One small patrol or ranger-type element of the enemy can slaughter a larger unit. Or in a general attack, the individual guards at the various houses may be the only ones who can get into action with any real success. The rest of the unit may be helpless. One house

United States World War II infantrymen enter a town in Germany in April 1945.

can be seized by the enemy, putting a wedge in the entire line and opening a corridor into the vitals of the command. Other occupied houses can be outflanked, cut off, screened, or generally made useless. A friendly counterattacking force would operate at a clear disadvantage.

The greatest percentage of urban habitation (United States excluded) is clustered in small villages. All of Europe, North Africa, and the Orient where the American soldier has fought and may have to fight again, follow this pattern. But this is not necessarily a liability. Villages can be both a comfort and a joy—if used properly. By properly, we mean "get out of town," especially by sundown, or at least get all or most of the fighting element out. Then, after the unit is dug in, small segments may be allowed to return.

Let us assume a situation that occurred many times in World War II and Korea, and, with greater emphasis on dispersion for the atomic battlefield, can be expected to happen many times again. A reinforced company or task force has seized its objective—a hill or a crossroads straddled by a small village of 30 or 40 buildings. The commander's orders are to hold until the situation develops or until neighboring areas are mopped up and orders to move are received. Friendly units are not in physical contact; the enemy in the area is relatively weak but active. Counterattack by the enemy is possible, but the threat is not too serious. The weather is cold, with intermittent sleet and snow.

Such a situation is elementary. The solution also—adequate defense, proper patrolling, and the like—should be elementary. However, several important considerations and principles can be illustrated in this familiar situation. These can be applied with slight modifications to any branch of service, in any town, in any war.

First, the company (task force) commander could insure the safety of that particular night by driving his entire command out into the snow. But this would do little for the morale of men who failed to understand, and would do nothing to end the fatigue of long combat or to save strength for the miserable days ahead. In any event all riflemen and machineguns should be sent outside the perimeter of the buildings themselves (only a few yards may suffice) where a proper defense should be dug in. All tanks, personnel carriers, supply vehicles, and mortars should be emplaced in support among the buildings or in concealed areas (woods) within the perimeter.

After the line is secured, outposts established, and the usual defense procedures followed, a percentage of the men could be allowed to leave their holes to seek the shelter and comfort of neighboring "warming houses." Some men could be allowed to sleep indoors if their fields of fire from windows or cellars can support their platoon. Approximately one-third of the men at a time could leave the line. If the weather is particularly foul, and the enemy potential slight, possibly up to one-half could seek warmth, shelter, and food. But never, in any tactical situation, regardless of fatigue or supposed freedom from attack, should any commander allow more than 50 percent of his men to abandon the cover of their holes. And never should noncommissioned officers be allowed to leave their commands in greater ratio than their men.

Commanders themselves must be cautioned. The biggest, richest homes and the large villas are usually on the edge of town or even slightly removed on a nearby hill. Any leader who succumbs to the lure of palatial quarters on the outskirts of his command, where he can be cut off or pinned down, is a fool and a poor soldier as well. Any substantial building or cellar near the hub of the village is his proper place. There the lights and activities of the message center will be masked, patrols can be briefed, the command function can best be carried out, and the command post best guarded.

Proper use of a populated area can make it a godsend. If mishandled, it becomes a trap. But so far as the fighting elements are concerned, heed the warning, "Get out of town!"